



OSCAR'S CABLE

In an excerpt from his memoir *Starflacker*, longtime Hollywood publicist Dick Guttman — who has repped stars from Paul Newman to Barbra Streisand — reveals how he invented the Academy screener long before VHS tapes and DVDs by having contenders shown on L.A.-only cable station Z Channel, propelling dark horse candidates like *The Conversation* and *Annie Hall* to Oscar nominations

After 55 years in Hollywood, publicist Dick Guttman decided to break the first rule of publicity — “get the hell out of the shot” — by penning a memoir. In *Starflacker* (a term his daughter coined), Guttman charts his career from his beginnings as a fresh-out-of-UCLA 23-year-old — sent to Paris by his bosses at Rogers & Cowan as the press agent for Billy Wilder’s *Love in the Afternoon* — to his partnering with Jerry Pam during the 1970s to form Guttman & Pam to the establishment of his own firm Guttman Associates. Along the way, he represented everyone from Cary Grant and Paul Newman to Elizabeth Taylor and Barbra Streisand. In this excerpt, Guttman recalls how he invented the “For Your Consideration” Oscar screener long before DVDs or even VHS tapes existed by partnering with Z Channel, the innovative Los Angeles-only pay cable outlet that championed such up-and-coming directors as Paul Verhoeven and Penelope Spheeris during its 1974 to 1989 run. Guttman is guest programmer for Turner Classic Movies in January (his movie selections are set to air Jan. 19). — ANDY LEWIS

- 1 Coppola (left) with wife Eleanor (second from left), their two children, his father, Carmine, and wife Italia at the 1975 Oscars, where he won best director for *The Godfather: Part II* and was nominated for *The Conversation*.
- 2 Hackman as Harry Caul in *The Conversation*, which won the 1974 Palme d’Or at Cannes but didn’t get the same year-end awards push from Paramount as *The Godfather: Part II*.
- 3 Jackson presented the best actor Oscar in 1975. The next year, the actress would be nominated for best actress for *Hedda*.
- 4 Woody Allen and Diane Keaton in 1977’s *Annie Hall*, which copied Guttman’s Z Channel screening strategy.
- 5 Schell (here opposite Jane Fonda) picked up an Oscar nomination for 1977’s *Julia* after it was shown on Z Channel.
- 6 The Z Channel logo in a still from Xan Cassavetes’ 2004 documentary *Z Channel: A Magnificent Obsession*.

You don’t create really effective ideas. You recognize them. The institution of the Z Channel “For Your Consideration” screenings is my only claim to fame. Much more claim than fame. It was a device of intravenously feeding our Oscar contender films to the great majority of Academy voters through a viewing procedure on cable TV, a procedure which for an excellent period of time only I could manipulate, my one moment of significant originality. It is a matter long since forgotten, but it was very significant to Guttman & Pam and to our client films and artists during the few years it glittered in Jerry’s and my hands and even after we had to share it with those who finally caught on to what we were doing.

Few films exceeded 1974’s *The Conversation* in originality of concept or daring of execution. It was a chilling insight into human nature and human fear. Gene Hackman was excited about the film precisely because it had 10 reasons to fail for every one prospect for success. So what was the desperation that drove Francis Ford Coppola into making *The*

Conversation? Perhaps he knew that this was the greatest script he might ever write. Maybe he thrust himself into it because he saw the production of *Godfather II* coming along like an avalanche and he didn’t know when he would find another window to make this amazing script. By the time post-production was finished, he was in Italy filming *Godfather II* and wasn’t feeling excitement from Paramount about *The Conversation*. I saw a golden opportunity.

This was a film made for festivals. It won the Palme d’Or at Cannes, but that didn’t change the studio stance. Instead of being released just after Cannes, it was held until the following spring. With Paramount actively ignoring *The Conversation*, full responsibility for exploring its Oscar chances fell into the laps of Guttman & Pam. An orphan film that had done poorly in release, its glowing reviews hardly in memory nine months later, its proud victory at Cannes over a year and a half past ... ? The heat on Francis was focused on his triumph with *Godfather II*, which went on to win best picture and best director, among other honors. But when

THE GUY

COPPOLA: JULIAN WASSER/THE LIFE IMAGES COLLECTION/GETTY IMAGES; Z: HARVEY: IFC FILMS/PHOTOPOST; CONVERSATION: PARAMOUNT PICTURES/PHOTOPOST; JACKSON: MICHAEL MORITZ/MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES; ANNE: UNITED ARTISTS/PHOTOPOST; GUTTMAN: JEFF VESPA/GETTY IMAGES FOR AUDI.



Oscar thinking started, *The Conversation* wasn't in the conversation.

I took the challenge very seriously, my devotion to it and to Gene's great performance being quite personal. We were in competition with such exalted films as *Chinatown*, *Lenny*, *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore*, *The Towering Inferno*, *Young Frankenstein*, *Murder on the Orient Express*, *Day for Night*, *Harry and Tonto*, *A Woman Under the Influence*, *Thunderbolt and Lightfoot*, *Blazing Saddles*, and, oh yes, a little film called *The Godfather: Part II* ... well, you get the idea. And the thing was that I really cared — and I really thought that anyone who saw *The Conversation* would vote for *The Conversation*. Only trouble? Nobody had seen it. This was before video screeners of Oscar-worthy movies. Even before VHS itself. Yes, some old movies were starting to show on cable channels, but they were old movies. If you didn't see a contending film in the theaters or at a studio screening, you didn't see it.

And then it dropped in my lap, a gift that gave Guttman & Pam an almost immoral advantage in Oscar campaigning over the next two or three years. Instead of trying to drag Oscar voters to this movie that I truly loved, it turned out what I really

had to do was find a way to drag that movie to the Oscar voters. Face up on my desk, atop a pile of unopened mail, was a sales promotional piece from a cable television station called Z Channel. This was 1974. The networks still ruled the TV roost. Cable was just coming in, and Z was a precursor of the blessings of TCM, showing all of the golden oldies.

On the front page of the promotional brochure was a map of all the areas that were served by Z Channel. It was, I suddenly realized, an almost exact overlay



Above: Z Channel programming guru Harvey. Below: Guttman and Dyan Cannon kicked off the 2012 awards season during a January party hosted by The Weinstein Co. at Chateau Marmont.



of all of the areas where card-carrying Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences members resided: Beverly Hills, the Canyons, Sherman Oaks, Encino, Woodland Hills, Holmby Hills, Brentwood, Bel Air, Santa Monica, Malibu ... Hold on, pilgrim! This was a prescription for the intravenous injection of movie-viewing directly into the body of the Academy's human component, the crucial few thousand who decided Oscar nominations and winners.

I called the head of Z Channel and told him I could get him *The Conversation* for exclusive TV viewing. No film previously had been seen on cable in the year of its release. I didn't need to throw in an on-camera interview with Gene Hackman to seal the deal. I needed it to alert Z's Academy viewers that for the very first time they were going to be able to see an Oscar contender in the comfort of their own home. Gene loved the film and understood that this was the only chance I had to get Academy viewership for *The Conversation*. He'd do the interview.

The other wild card in this was a guy named Jerry Harvey, a film-buff extraordinaire who was Z's programming director. His enthusiasm for film excellence was such that you could turn on Z any hour of the day and know that you would love what was on. Jerry Pam and I decided we would label the multiple showings of *The Conversation* as "For Your Consideration" screenings, and Jerry Harvey threw himself into them wholeheartedly. It was a godsend, not just for the screening-challenged Malibuans but for everyone with an Academy card. *The Conversation*, the award-quality film least seen by Academy members that year, was going to get put in front of the eyeballs.

I depended on [producer] Fred Roos to sell this radical idea to Francis, and Fred came back with the sad fact that some other cable operators had heard about it and were trying to sour Francis on the Z Channel screening plan. Fred told us Francis' associates had given it a no-go because a cable operator in Fresno had said he would cancel any licensing of *The Conversation* if Z got that edge. When Fred checked, it turned out that we were talking only a \$6,000 loss — which was what taking out two awards-bait ads in the trades would cost. I told him to tell Francis that I thought the Z idea could get us a nomination for a film Francis loved. Francis gave us a go.

I was getting great feedback. A first-run movie on home TV screens simply hadn't been done before. It was getting the heat and word of mouth that come of being something new. Of course I was being hammered with the argument that seeing a film on a small screen is not equivalent to the theatrical experience. I would respond that it was a helluva lot superior to having it not seen at all.



Some people at Paramount were telling Francis we had cost him the Oscar because it would split his vote for best picture and best director between *The Conversation* and *The Godfather: Part II*. We knew that wasn't true. The people who wrote *The Conversation* on their ballot — I'll put my hand in the fire on this one — had written *Godfather II* as well. In nominating, you mark five films in order of preference. Voters came to those ballots in awe of the cosmic range of a great director. Everyone knew that if Francis were to win, it would be for *Godfather II*. For *The Conversation*, the win was simply getting the nomination, the little film coming from nowhere. But it did come from somewhere ... the voters' TV screens. And there it was, standing up there as a best picture nominee along with *Chinatown*, *Lenny*, *The Towering Inferno* and *The Godfather: Part II*. During the process of that Academy Award season, we had reason to believe that Paramount really hated Guttman & Pam because we had brought *The Conversation* in as a wild card in their very important and monocular pursuit of Oscar for *Godfather II*. But they apparently gathered from the surprise *Conversation* nominations that Guttman & Pam was on to something.

The following year, Paramount released Ingmar Bergman's extraordinary *Scenes From a Marriage*. Paramount chief David Picker very nobly wanted to give the film every possible shot at Academy consideration. But how? It was a six-hour movie — the length was the catch-22 — but we put it on Z Channel with a "For Your Consideration" screening schedule just to give it a chance. Before we did, Mr. Picker said I had to get permission from the town's great exhibitor of foreign art films, Max Laemmle, a personal friend of all the European auteurs. He was



1 1978's *Heaven Can Wait* picked up nine Oscar nominations after it was shown on Z.
2 Bergman's *Scenes From a Marriage* aired on Z Channel but lost an Oscar nomination on a technicality.
3 Beatty at the 1979 Academy Awards.



"Instead of trying to drag Oscar voters to a movie, I had to drag that movie to Oscar voters."

GUTTMAN

playing *Scenes From a Marriage* at one of his key theaters that was right in the middle of Z Channel country. The TV airings could hurt his business, but he felt he owed it to Liv Ullmann and Bergman, who had put so many lines in front of his theaters. What happened is that a six-hour film with subtitles at the bottom of the screen not always completely visible

was tough TV viewing. But Z aficionados saw enough to want to see it all ... and the business the film was doing at the theater kicked up substantially.

Z was still working its magic, and the next years we pushed two films Guttman & Pam represented, *The Man in the Glass Booth* and *Hedda*, with "For Your Consideration" screenings, facilitating Oscar voters' viewing from their couches. Two of our clients, Maximilian Schell and Glenda Jackson, were Oscar nominated for best actor and best actress for those films seen primarily on TV screens. Jerry and I kept Z a kind of open secret and our private advantage for several years, positioning our films for Oscar consideration. We were thrilled that we'd been allowed to hold the dice for so long. We'd had the magic wand all to ourselves for two or three prestidigitary years. The Z Channel edge was the best gift I've ever given myself, a gift that kept on giving.

In 1977, Lloyd Leipzig, who ran some of the town's great Oscar campaigns for United Artists, caught on. He demanded to have Woody Allen's *Annie Hall* presented in that year's "For Your Consideration" screenings, and we were delighted because it brought our client Z Channel into the a bright, bright spotlight. A year later, Warren Beatty not only greenlighted our putting *Heaven Can Wait* in the "For Your Consideration" schedule, but he personally selected the scheduled times. They don't come any brighter. **THR**

The Oscar Hits of L.A.'s Z Channel

Cable screenings propelled these films to the ceremony, if not always to a win

The Conversation (1974)
NOMINATIONS: 3 WINS: 0

Annie Hall (1977)
NOMINATIONS: 5 WINS: 4

Julia (1977)
NOMINATIONS: 11 WINS: 3

The Deer Hunter (1978)
NOMINATIONS: 9 WINS: 5

Heaven Can Wait (1978)
NOMINATIONS: 9 WINS: 1



Coming Home (1978)
NOMINATIONS: 8 WINS: 3



Midnight Express (1978)
NOMINATIONS: 7 WINS: 3



An Unmarried Woman (1978)
NOMINATIONS: 2 WINS: 0



Inside Moves (1980)
NOMINATIONS: 1 WINS: 0



Salvador (1986)
NOMINATIONS: 2 WINS: 0